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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANAMA 001426

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/ARPI, NEA/PPD
USTR FOR J BUNTIN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/03/2015

TAGS: PREL KPAO KISL ETRD BA

SUBJECT: NEWSPAPER'S FALSE ACCUSATION AGAINST EMBASSY
INCITES CRITICISM FROM SUNNI CLERICS

Classified by Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

Summary

11. (C) Arabic daily Akhbar Al Khaleej September 29 printed a small front-page item accusing the Embassy of a superpower of requesting the names of Sunni preachers in Bahrain so it could monitor their statements and criticisms. Several Sunni Imams denounced this alleged request in their September 30 Friday sermons, which they attributed to the United States. The Imams and a columnist linked this charge with the recent leak of news that the GOB had closed the Israel boycott office on the eve of congressional hearings on ratification of the U.S.-Bahrain free trade agreement, saying these developments demonstrate American interference in Bahrain's domestic affairs. The Embassy issued a press release October 1 categorically refuting the accusation. The recent opening of parliament and resumption of regular sessions provide another opportunity for our opponents to complain at high volume about the U.S. role in Bahrain. End Summary.

Alleged Request for Preacher Names

12. (U) The September 29 edition of the Arabic daily Akhbar Al Khaleej, known for its pan-Arabic editorial slant, contained a front-page piece titled, "The Embassy of a Superpower Requests List of Names of Mosque Preachers!" The one-sentence item says that the Embassy of a superpower requested the names of all Sunni preachers to understand their perspectives and to monitor their criticism of the superpower.

13. (U) The accusation was widely discussed in Sunni preachers' Friday sermons September 30. Shaikh Nasser Al Fadallah, an outspoken critic of the United States who had been temporarily removed from his position as Imam at a Muharraq mosque for one month during the summer for his scathing and unfounded criticism of the U.S. and Israel, strongly denounced the alleged request, asking, "How bold can the Ambassador be?" He complained the Ambassador does not have the right to monitor the affairs of clerics in the country, and demanded an urgent parliamentary investigation. Comments from Fadallah and other preachers received front-page coverage in the press October 1.

Linking Claim with End of Israel Boycott

14. (U) Shaikh Mohammed Khalid, a virulently anti-American member of parliament, described the request as a disgrace. He claimed the U.S. wanted to categorize Sunni Imams according to their views and issue orders to the Bahraini government to transfer or silence critics. He cursed the United States and asked God to punish Americans, referring to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. He feared the Ambassador's "orders" to the government would be obeyed, like the government did when "it lifted the ban on Zionist goods," a reference to the closure of the Israel boycott office. Shaikh Adel Al Hassan complained of flagrant interference in domestic affairs. Shaikh Ibrahim Bu Sandal said the request has dangerous consequences and Bahrainis must unite to prevent such interference, as they should do to oppose lifting the ban on Israeli goods.

15. (U) Akhbar Al Khaleej columnist Hisham Al Zayani wrote October 1, "What does the American Ambassador have to do with Sunni mosque Imams? Why does he want to know their names? Is it because he wants to complain about them to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs when they say something that he is not happy with, and therefore issues orders to ban them? What are the authorities of the U.S. Ambassador in the country? Has he become the ruler of this country?"

Press Release Corrects the Record

16. (U) The Embassy issued a press release October 1 that read, "In reference to press reports and statements over the weekend alleging that the U.S. Ambassador or the U.S. Embassy requested from the Ministry of Islamic Affairs a list of Friday preachers at Sunni mosques in Bahrain, the U.S. Embassy wants to make perfectly clear that neither the U.S. Ambassador nor any member of the embassy staff requested such a list and has no intention of doing so. These reports are simply unfounded." The statement ran in English and Arabic in all Bahraini papers that had previously covered the issue.

17. (C) While researching the 2005 International Religious Freedom report during the late spring, EmbOffs asked the Ministry of Islamic Affairs for the number of Sunni and Shia mosques present in Bahrain. The Ministry was uncomfortable responding to the question and referred it to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We never received an answer. We have more recently had discussions with officials at the Ministry of Islamic Affairs on possible cooperation and programming to encourage moderation at the mosques, but we have not asked for a list of Friday speakers and do not know how this false report was generated. The editor of Akhbar Al Khaleej continues to insist that he received his information from a reliable source.

Comment

18. (C) Opponents of the United States in Bahrain have been on edge since word leaked of the GOB's closure of the Israel boycott office, which anti-normalization forces have characterized as Bahraini capitulation to American demands related to congressional ratification of the free trade agreement (septel). They have been looking for a reason to complain publicly about the United States, and the patently untrue claim of an American demand for a list of Sunni preachers' names provided them with just the right excuse. The issue is beginning to die down, but the commencement this week of regular sessions of the elected lower house Council of Representatives offers another public opportunity for our critics to complain at high volume about American "interference" in Bahraini domestic affairs.

MONROE